



Visualising Everyday Urban Coolness: A Semiological Analysis of Istanbul's Official Destination Imagery

Gündelik Kentsel 'Cool'luğun Görselleştirilmesi: İstanbul'un Resmî Destinasyon İmgeleri Üzerine Göstergibilimsel Bir Analiz

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Abstract

This study examines how everyday urban life is visually organised within Istanbul's official destination imagery and how such representations relate to the communicative production of everyday urban coolness. The analysis draws on still photographs from the "Istanbul Bucket List" on GoTürkiye and interprets a purposively selected sample using an integrated visual-semiological approach combining thematic analysis with visual grammar. The findings indicate that informal social interaction, routine mobility, everyday consumption, and lived urban environments form a consistent representational repertoire. Viewer positioning is shaped through indirect gaze, eye-level perspectives, predominantly medium social distance, and open framing, which together support a sense of proximity alongside an observational stance. Desirability is suggested through accessibility, social vibrancy, and the impression of a city already in use, while iconic elements play a secondary role. Within this material, everyday urban coolness appears as a visual-semiological effect emerging from the interaction between everyday representations and compositional strategies. In this sense, the study does not introduce a new theoretical model but clarifies how coolness may be visually organised within destination imagery. The study contributes to research on destination imagery, urban authenticity, and coolness by offering a more detailed account of how ordinariness is visually structured to appear accessible, socially meaningful, and open to participation.

Keywords: Destination Imagery, Everyday Urban Life, Social Semiotics, Urban Coolness, Visual Grammar

Özet

Bu çalışma, İstanbul'un resmî destinasyon imajında gündelik kentsel yaşamın görsel olarak nasıl düzenlendiğini ve bu temsillerin gündelik kentsel "coolness" üretimiyle nasıl ilişkilendiğini incelemektedir. Analiz, GoTürkiye platformunda yer alan "Istanbul Bucket List" bölümündeki durağan fotoğraflara dayanmakta ve amaçlı olarak seçilen bir örneklem, tematik çözümleme ile görsel dilbilgisini birleştiren bütünlük bir görsel-semiyolojik yaklaşım çerçevesinde yorumlanmaktadır. Bulgular, gayriresmî sosyalleşme, rutin hareketlilik, gündelik tüketim ve içinde yaşanan kentsel mekânların tutarlı bir temsil repertuarı oluşturduğunu göstermektedir. İzleyici konumlandırması; dolaylı bakış, göz hizası perspektifi, ağırlıklı olarak orta sosyal mesafe ve açık kadraj

aracılığıyla şekillenmekte; bu unsurlar birlikte yakınlık ile gözlemci bir duruşun eşzamanlı kurulmasını sağlamaktadır. Arzu edilebilirlik, erişilebilirlik, toplumsal canlılık ve hâlihazırda kullanılan bir şehir algısı üzerinden iletilirken, ikonik unsurlar ikincil düzeyde kalmaktadır. Analiz, gündelik kentsel "coolness" olgusunun, gündelik temsiller ile kompozisyonel stratejilerin etkileşimi sonucunda ortaya çıkan görsel-semiyolojik bir etki olarak değerlendirilebileceğini ortaya koymaktadır. Bu yönüyle çalışma yeni bir kuramsal model önermemekte, aksine "coolness" kavramının destinasyon imajı içerisinde görsel olarak nasıl yapılandırıldığını açıklığa kavuşturmaktadır. Bu bağlamda çalışma, gündelikliğin erişilebilir, toplumsal olarak anlamlı ve katılıma açık bir deneyim olarak nasıl görselleştirildiğini ayrıntılandırarak destinasyon imajı, kentsel özgünlük ve "coolness" literatürüne katkı sağlamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Destinasyon İmajı, Görsel Dilbilgisi, Gündelik Kentsel Yaşam, Kentsel Coolness, Toplumsal Semiyotik

1. INTRODUCTION

Urban destinations are increasingly communicated as spaces of lived experience, where ordinary practices and everyday rhythms become central visual resources in destination imagery (Ashworth, 1994; Frisch et al., 2019; Larsen, 2019). This shift aligns with broader changes in tourism promotion, as cities are no longer framed only through landmark spectacle or monumental vistas. Instead, street-level life—walking, sitting in cafés, casual social encounters—has become a recurring way of making the city legible and attractive (Ebejer, 2024; Larsen, 2019).

Within this context, official destination imagery matters because it offers institutionally curated visual narratives that shape how urban experiences are anticipated before travel. Official destination websites operate as semiotic interfaces: they foreground particular forms of social life, spatial practice, and belonging, and they organise preferred ways of seeing the city (Garrod, 2009; Hallett & Kaplan-Weinger, 2010; Metro-Roland, 2011). Images therefore do more than depict urban environments. They structure what appears accessible, desirable, and imaginable as experience.

The concept of urban coolness provides a useful analytical lens for examining this representational shift. In tourism research, coolness has been linked to authenticity, vibrancy, originality, and social immediacy, with emphasis on how such qualities shape destination appeal (Kock, 2021). At the same time, coolness is not a fixed urban attribute. It is assembled through representational practices that select, frame, and aestheticise particular scenes and relations (Aiello, 2006; Kock, 2021). Everyday urban life becomes central here because ordinary practices can signal normalcy and authenticity while remaining carefully curated within official imagery (Condevaux et al., 2021; Frisch et al., 2019).

Despite growing interest in destination coolness, existing work has largely prioritised perceptual outcomes or branding strategies, with limited attention to the representational mechanisms through which everydayness is made meaningful and communicatively effective (Kock, 2021; Lobinger & Mele, 2022). Studies often describe everyday scenes without systematically examining how images position viewers through compositional choices such as gaze, distance, angle, and framing (Metro-Roland, 2011; Rose, 2016). This leaves a gap in understanding how ordinariness is visually organised as a communicative resource within official destination imagery.

This study addresses this gap by adopting an integrated visual-semiological approach that examines thematic representations of everyday urban practices alongside visual grammar. Rather than proposing a new theoretical model of urban coolness, the study aims to specify how everyday urban coolness is visually organised within official destination imagery through the interaction between representational content and compositional strategies. Destination images are approached as structured sign systems in which what is shown and how it is shown jointly produce meanings of accessibility and participation (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2021; Mitchell, 1994). By focusing on still photographs that depict ordinary urban life, the analysis clarifies the visual devices through which

everyday urban coolness is produced as a representational effect within an official destination platform.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Destination Imagery and Urban Representation

Destination imagery has long been recognised as a central mechanism through which places are symbolically constructed and communicated to prospective visitors (Echtner & Ritchie, 1993; Garrod, 2009; Urry, 2002). Early studies emphasised iconic landmarks, panoramic views, and architectural distinctiveness as primary carriers of destination identity, positioning cities mainly as objects to be observed. These representations prioritised spectacle and spatial scale, reinforcing distance between viewer and place (Urry, 2002).

More recent research identifies a shift towards experience-oriented imagery that foregrounds human presence, social atmosphere, and everyday spatial practices (Mattei, 2024). Urban destinations increasingly appear through street-level scenes, informal encounters, and routine activities, reflecting a broader emphasis on lived experience (Chatzigeorgiou et al., 2025; Kock, 2021; Larsen, 2019; Stock, 2019). This shift reduces distance and reframes the city as something to be entered and inhabited.

What remains less clearly articulated is how this communicative effect is visually produced. Existing studies document the growing presence of everyday scenes but provide limited insight into how images establish proximity, participation, and experiential accessibility through compositional organisation.

2.2. Urban Coolness in Tourism Studies

The concept of urban coolness has attracted growing attention as a way to explain why certain cities are appealing beyond conventional destination attributes. Coolness is associated with authenticity, originality, vibrancy, and social immediacy, with empirical work linking these qualities to emotional attachment and symbolic value in tourist decision-making (Kock, 2021).

Research in this area has primarily approached coolness as a perceptual outcome, often measured through survey-based methods or discussed at the level of branding strategy. This leaves less clarity regarding how coolness is communicated within destination imagery (Kock, 2021; Mattei, 2024).

A representational perspective suggests that coolness emerges through the selection and organisation of scenes that convey accessibility, social activity, and embeddedness in everyday life. The visual processes that support this effect, however, remain not yet clearly articulated.

2.3. Everyday Life, Authenticity, and the Normalisation of Urban Experience

Everyday life has become a central reference point in tourism imagery, particularly in relation to authenticity. Ordinary practices such as walking, eating, or informal socialising are frequently interpreted as indicators of “real” urban experience (Larsen, 2019; Manlee & Kasemsarn, 2025). These representations communicate familiarity and social normalcy, making destinations appear accessible rather than staged.

At the same time, research indicates that everydayness is actively constructed. Ordinary scenes are selected, framed, and aesthetically organised, turning routine practices into communicative resources (Condevaux et al., 2021; Metro-Roland, 2011). In this sense, everyday life functions as a representational strategy rather than a neutral background.

However, the way this transformation operates at the level of visual organisation remains difficult to establish clearly. While the presence of everyday practices is well established, the

mechanisms that make these practices persuasive and visually coherent are less frequently examined (Lobinger & Mele, 2022; Rose, 2016).

2.4. Visual Semiotics and Visual Grammar in Tourism Research

Visual semiotics provides a framework for analysing how images produce meaning through structured relations between elements, contexts, and viewers (Aiello, 2006; Metro-Roland, 2011). Within this framework, visual grammar offers a systematic approach to examining how compositional features such as gaze, social distance, camera angle, and framing shape viewer engagement (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2021).

The application of visual grammar in tourism research remains relatively limited. Many studies focus on thematic content or aesthetic qualities without systematically linking these to viewer positioning and participation (Lobinger & Mele, 2022). As a result, the role of compositional organisation in producing experiential accessibility remains only partially articulated.

This limitation becomes more evident in analyses of everyday urban imagery, where subtle visual cues are likely to play a central role in shaping interpretation.

2.5. Synthesis and Analytical Implications

The literature can be grouped into three interrelated strands: destination imagery and urban representation, studies of urban coolness, and analyses of everyday life and visual meaning. Each strand provides valuable insights, yet they rarely converge at the level of visual organisation. Research on destination imagery identifies a shift towards everyday representation; studies on coolness explain its experiential significance; and work on everyday life highlights its association with authenticity. However, the question of how these elements are jointly structured within images remains insufficiently explored.

This study addresses this gap by examining how representations of everyday urban life and compositional strategies operate together within official destination imagery. It treats images as structured sign systems in which thematic content and visual form jointly produce meanings of accessibility, participation, and coolness. In this sense, everyday urban coolness is approached as a visual-semiological effect, rather than as a purely perceptual or evaluative outcome.

3. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

3.1. Everyday Urban Coolness as a Visual-Semiological Construction

Contemporary destination imagery increasingly draws on three interconnected domains: urban representation, experiential understandings of coolness, and the symbolic role of everyday life. While each has been examined separately, their intersection at the level of visual representation remains less clearly specified (Metro-Roland, 2011).

Research on destination imagery shows that cities are no longer represented solely through iconic landmarks. Ordinary urban scenes—social interaction, routine practices, and lived space—have become central to how destinations are communicated (Garrod, 2009; King et al., 2024). These representations reduce distance and encourage viewers to imagine the city as a space of participation rather than detached observation (Larsen, 2019; Stock, 2019).

Studies of urban coolness describe it as an experiential quality shaped by authenticity, vibrancy, and social immediacy (Kock, 2021). This perspective explains why certain representations are perceived as attractive but does not clarify how such qualities are visually produced. In this study, coolness is therefore approached as something constructed within representation, instead of being treated simply as a perceptual outcome.

Work on everyday life highlights the symbolic role of ordinariness in signalling authenticity and familiarity (Larsen, 2019). Ordinary practices—walking, sitting, eating, and socialising—derive meaning from how they are framed and organised. They function as communicative resources rather than neutral depictions of reality (Condevaux et al., 2021; Metro-Roland, 2011).

Visual semiotics provides a way to examine this process. Within this perspective, visual grammar offers a structured approach to analysing how compositional features such as gaze, social distance, camera angle, and framing shape relations between image and viewer (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2021). These elements influence whether viewers remain distant observers or are positioned as symbolically co-present within the scene.

This study brings these strands together through an integrated analytical perspective. Rather than introducing a new theoretical model, it specifies how representations of everyday urban life and compositional strategies operate together in shaping meanings of accessibility, participation, and coolness. Meaning is therefore understood to emerge from the interaction between what is represented and how it is visually organised.

Within this analytical framing, urban coolness can be interpreted as taking shape through three interrelated representational effects:

- the normalisation of everyday practices,
- the production of symbolic proximity,
- and the framing of participation as accessible and unforced.

Everyday urban coolness is thus treated as a representational outcome structured through visual organisation, rather than as an inherent property of the city or a purely perceptual response.

3.2. Research Questions

Building on research on destination imagery and everyday urban life (Condevaux et al., 2021; Garrod, 2009; Larsen, 2019), the study examines how everyday urban practices are visually represented in official destination imagery.

RQ1: How is everyday urban life represented in official destination imagery, and which everyday practices are most prominently visualised?

Drawing on visual semiotics and visual grammar (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2021; Rose, 2016), the study considers how compositional strategies shape viewer positioning.

RQ2: Which compositional strategies—particularly in terms of gaze, social distance, camera angle, and framing—structure these representations, and how do they position the viewer?

Building on research on destination coolness and visual meaning making (Aiello, 2006; Kock, 2021; Metro-Roland, 2011), the study explores how these visual configurations contribute to the construction of urban coolness.

RQ3: How does the interaction between thematic representations and compositional strategies contribute to the construction of urban coolness in terms of accessibility, vibrancy, and participation?

Finally, drawing on work on urban tourism and lived experience (Koens, 2021; Larsen, 2019; Urry, 2002), the study considers how these representations reshape how the city is imagined.

RQ4: How do these visual configurations contribute to positioning the city as an environment imagined as lived and accessible, rather than solely as an object of observation?

4. METHODOLOGY

4.1. Analytical Orientation: An Integrated Visual–Semiological Approach

This study adopts an integrated visual–semiological approach that combines thematic semiological interpretation with visual grammar analysis within a unified analytical frame (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2021; Lobinger & Mele, 2022; Rose, 2016).

Rather than treating “what is represented” and “how it is represented” as separate stages, images are approached as structured sign systems in which representational content and compositional form are interpreted together in the production of meaning (Aiello, 2006; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2021; Rose, 2016). Thematic semiological interpretation is used to identify recurring representations of everyday urban life, while visual grammar guides the analysis of how viewer relations are organised through gaze, social distance, camera angle, and framing.

This orientation aligns with qualitative visual research that treats images as sites of meaning-making rather than as neutral reflections of social reality (Lobinger & Mele, 2022; Rose, 2016).

4.2. Data Source, Corpus Construction, and Sampling Logic

The data consist of still photographs published on Istanbul's official destination website (GoTürkiye, n.d.-a), collected between September 2025 and April 2026. Official digital platforms were selected because they provide institutionally curated visual narratives that shape destination imaginaries and communicate preferred meanings to prospective visitors (Ashworth, 1994; Garrod, 2009; Metro-Roland, 2011). The focus on still images allows for consistent examination of compositional resources central to visual grammar, including gaze, social distance, camera angle, and framing (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2021).

Images were collected from the “Istanbul Bucket List” section of the *istanbul.goturkiye* website (GoTürkiye, n.d.-b), which foregrounds urban neighbourhoods, lifestyle, and everyday city life. The full corpus comprised 112 still images available at the time of data collection.

From this corpus, a purposive sample of 40 images was selected using a maximum variation logic. Selection was guided by three criteria: (a) depiction of everyday urban activities (e.g., walking, sitting, socialising, routine consumption), (b) inclusion of human figures embedded in non-ceremonial urban settings, and (c) avoidance of overtly monumental, panoramic, or highly staged representations.

This sampling strategy is theoretically guided rather than statistically representative. The study does not aim to demonstrate how Istanbul is represented across the full image corpus. Instead, it focuses on how everyday urban life is visually constructed when it is foregrounded within official destination imagery. The purposive design therefore enables in-depth analysis of representational mechanisms rather than generalisation to the entire dataset (Rose, 2016).

4.3. Data Management and Transparency

To ensure traceability, all images were systematically archived. Each image record includes its URL, page context, and access date. The dataset was organised in a structured Excel file documenting the full corpus and the sampling decisions. This documentation provides a transparent record of corpus construction and can be made available upon reasonable request.

4.4. Integrated Coding and Analytical Procedure

Coding was conducted through an iterative and integrated process consistent with the study's analytical orientation. Each image was analysed holistically, with thematic and compositional interpretations developed in relation to one another.

The first analytical layer identifies recurring representations of everyday urban life, including informal social interaction, everyday mobility, ordinary consumption, and lived urban space (Aiello, 2006). The second analytical layer examines how compositional features shape viewer–image relations, positioning the viewer along a continuum from detached observation to symbolic co-presence (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2021).

Thematic and visual grammar codes were applied concurrently to each image, enabling interpretation of how everyday practices are visually organised to communicate accessibility and participation. Coding decisions were refined through repeated engagement with the dataset, supported by analytic memos that document category development and application.

To assess consistency, a subset of the images ($n = 12$) was independently coded by a second researcher. Intercoder reliability was calculated using Cohen's kappa across key categorical variables (thematic categories and visual grammar dimensions), based on nominal agreement conditions. The resulting coefficient ($\kappa = 0.74$, 95% CI [0.67, 0.81]) indicates substantial agreement.

4.5. Operationalising Visual Grammar as a Semiotic Resource

Within this framework, visual grammar is treated as a semiotic resource embedded within the broader semiological interpretation rather than as a stand-alone method (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2021).

Four compositional dimensions guided the analysis: gaze (direct vs. indirect), social distance (close, medium, long), camera angle (eye-level, high, low), and framing (open vs. closed scenes). These dimensions are interpreted as cues that shape symbolic proximity between the viewer and the depicted scene.

Indirect gaze, medium social distance, and eye-level perspectives are interpreted as supporting non-intrusive engagement and a sense of shared ordinariness, while long distance or elevated angles suggest observational detachment. Framing is used to assess whether scenes are presented as part of continuous urban space or as visually isolated moments.

Operational definitions and coding categories are detailed in the methodological codebook (Appendix A, Table A2).

4.6. Codebook and Analytical Categories

A structured codebook was developed to ensure analytical consistency and transparency. The codebook integrates thematic semiological categories and visual grammar dimensions and aligns them with the research questions (Appendix A, Tables A1–A3).

Within this framework, everyday urban coolness is operationalised as a composite interpretive category based on the co-occurrence of thematic and compositional indicators. Higher levels of coolness correspond to images where everyday practices are combined with cues of symbolic proximity and participatory accessibility, while more moderate levels reflect partial alignment between these elements.

This approach clarifies how coolness is analytically inferred within the study rather than treating it as a predefined or externally measured variable.

4.7. Complementary Content Analysis (Text–Image Interface)

To strengthen analytical depth, a complementary content analysis was conducted on the same set of 40 images. This component does not replicate the thematic categories of everyday urban life. Instead, it examines (i) textual call-to-action formulations and (ii) the presence and mode of iconicity.

The unit of analysis is a single visual card together with its associated title text as presented on the official GoTürkiye platform. Coding categories and definitions are provided in Appendix C1, and summary results are reported in Appendix C2.

The scope of this complementary analysis is intentionally limited to avoid overlap with the primary semiological interpretation and to maintain focus on the integrated visual–semiological framework.

5. FINDINGS

This section reports findings from the integrated visual–semiological analysis of the purposively selected image set ($n = 40$), structured by the research questions. The analysis does not aim to statistically represent the full “Istanbul Bucket List” corpus. Instead, it identifies patterned ways in which everyday urban life is visually organised and made inviting through the interaction of thematic content and compositional resources. The distribution of thematic categories reflects the purposive sampling design used to enable comparison across everyday domains (Appendix A, Table A1; Appendix B, Table B1). Patterns in viewer positioning are presented through the coded visual grammar dimensions (Appendix A, Table A2; Appendix B, Table B2). A focused content analysis complements these findings by examining call-to-action phrasing and iconicity at the text–image interface (Appendix C).

5.1. Representations of Everyday Urban Life in Official Destination Imagery (RQ1)

Across the analysed image set, everyday urban life is foregrounded through four recurrent domains: informal social interaction, everyday mobility, ordinary consumption, and lived urban space (Appendix A, Table A1). The purposive sampling design produces an even distribution across these domains ($n = 10$ per category; Appendix B, Table B1), enabling systematic comparison rather than reflecting frequency in the broader corpus.

Informal social interaction appears through scenes of people sitting together in cafés, conversing in public space, or sharing leisure moments without visible performance for the camera. These images suggest sociality as a routine feature of the urban environment and frame the city as open to participation. The emphasis lies on mundane togetherness rather than eventfulness, positioning the city as socially legible and approachable.

Everyday mobility is visualised through walking, cycling, tram journeys, and slow movement through streets and neighbourhoods. Mobility appears as a recurring rhythm of urban life, contributing to an interpretation of the city as navigable and experientially accessible. The visual repertoire foregrounds circulation within ordinary settings, supporting the reading of Istanbul as lived space.

Ordinary consumption is visible in coffee drinking, street food encounters, and casual dining. These practices are represented as routine lifestyle activities rather than exceptional gastronomic events. Consumption operates as a sign of familiarity and everyday belonging, with the city communicated through accessible practices embedded in social space.

Lived urban space is conveyed through streets, cafés, squares, and neighbourhood environments presented as already in use. These scenes frame the city as inhabited and continuous, providing context for everyday practices rather than isolating them as discrete attractions. Across these domains, ordinariness operates as a recurring communicative resource through which social normalcy and everyday accessibility are suggested.

A closer reading of selected images helps clarify how these patterns operate at the level of individual cases.

In one image depicting informal social interaction, a group of people is shown seated in an outdoor café setting, engaged in conversation. The absence of direct gaze positions the viewer as an observer rather than a participant in the interaction. The use of eye-level perspective establishes a sense of equality between viewer and depicted subjects, while medium social distance allows the scene to remain legible without suggesting intrusion. Open framing further situates the interaction within a continuous urban environment, reinforcing the impression of everyday life unfolding naturally.

A second example, focused on everyday mobility, presents individuals walking along a street or crossing an urban space. Here again, indirect gaze and eye-level positioning create a non-intrusive observational stance. The composition emphasises movement within a lived environment, while open framing connects the activity to its broader spatial context. These elements together support an interpretation of the city as accessible and navigable through routine practices.

These examples do not function as isolated instances but illustrate how compositional features and thematic representations operate together in shaping the overall visual logic identified in the dataset. They provide a more detailed view of how everyday urban life is made visible as socially meaningful and experientially approachable within destination imagery.

5.2. Visual–Semiological Strategies and Viewer Positioning (RQ2)

The analysis identifies consistent compositional patterns that organise how everyday urban life is made accessible to viewers. These patterns are described through gaze, social distance, camera angle, and framing (Appendix A, Table A2). The reported distributions refer to the analysed set ($n = 40$) and should be interpreted as internal patterns within the sample.

Gaze. Indirect gaze is present in all analysed images (100%; Appendix B, Table B2). Depicted subjects typically do not address the camera, appearing absorbed in activities or social interaction. This non-addressive structure positions the viewer as an observer with visual access to everyday life, without establishing direct interpersonal engagement.

Social distance. Medium distance is the most frequent configuration (55%; 22/40), accompanied by long distance (30%; 12/40) and close distance (15%; 6/40) (Appendix B, Table B2). The prevalence of medium shots creates a balance between visibility and distance, allowing practices and social relations to be recognised without suggesting intrusion. This configuration can be read as supporting symbolic proximity while maintaining an observational stance.

Camera angle. Eye-level perspectives are dominant (87.5%; 35/40), with high angles used less frequently (10%; 4/40) and low angles rare (2.5%; 1/40) (Appendix B, Table B2). Eye-level positioning organises viewer–subject relations through perceived equality and social normalcy, avoiding exaggerated or hierarchical viewpoints.

Framing. Open framing is prevalent (82.5%; 33/40), while closed framing appears in a smaller proportion of images (17.5%; 7/40) (Appendix B, Table B2). Open composition embeds everyday practices within continuous urban environments, reinforcing spatial continuity and the sense of an ongoing lived context.

Co-occurrence patterns show that these viewer-positioning cues recur across thematic domains. Indirect gaze appears consistently across all themes, while medium distance and open framing vary by domain (Appendix B, Table B3). Mobility and lived urban space are most strongly associated with open framing, while consumption and social interaction show higher within-theme use of medium distance (Appendix B, Table B3). These variations suggest differentiation within a stable overall pattern.

5.3. Everyday Urban Coolness as a Visual–Semiological Outcome (RQ3–RQ4)

The interaction between thematic representations of everyday life and the compositional patterns described above can be interpreted as producing everyday urban coolness within the analysed imagery. Here, coolness is treated as a representational effect that emerges through the visual organisation of ordinariness, symbolic proximity, and accessible participation (Appendix A, Table A3).

Across the image set, desirability is suggested through scenes that appear already inhabited and socially active. Everyday practices are presented as familiar and accessible, supported by indirect gaze and eye-level viewpoints that maintain non-intrusive viewer relations. Medium social distance and open framing create a sense of proximity without eliminating distance, allowing the city to appear both approachable and self-contained.

The supplementary distributions support this interpretation. High coolness is coded in 75% of images (30/40), while medium coolness accounts for 25% (10/40) (Appendix B, Table B2). These values should not be interpreted as population parameters. They indicate that, within this purposively selected set, the alignment between everyday content and participation-oriented compositional cues is consistently associated with higher levels of coolness as defined in the codebook.

The complementary content analysis adds nuance by indicating that visual normalisation is sometimes accompanied by directive textual framings or selective iconic references (Appendix C2). Descriptive naming without a call-to-action appears slightly more frequently than imperative phrasing (52.5% vs. 47.5%; Appendix C2, Table C1). Iconicity remains present but not dominant: non-iconic everyday spaces account for half of the set, semi-iconic places for approximately one third, and globally iconic landmarks for a smaller share (Appendix C2, Table C2). Where iconicity is present, it is more often embedded in lived context than presented as distant spectacle (Appendix C2, Table C3a). Text–image alignment is prevalent, with smaller proportions showing tension or inverse pairing (Appendix C2, Table C3b).

A consistent visual logic emerges from these findings through which everyday urban life is organised as accessible and socially meaningful. This logic contributes to an understanding of how the city can be visually framed as an environment imagined as lived and experientially reachable.

6. DISCUSSION

This study examined how everyday urban life is visually constructed within official destination imagery and how such representations relate to the communicative production of everyday urban coolness. The findings suggest that ordinariness in urban settings does not function as a passive reflection of reality but as a structured representational resource shaped through recurring visual patterns (Aiello, 2006; Rose, 2016).

Across the analysed images, everyday urban life is articulated through informal social interaction, routine mobility, ordinary consumption, and lived urban spaces. These domains form a coherent representational repertoire in which the city appears socially active and already inhabited. This pattern aligns with research identifying a shift in destination imagery away from monumentality and spectacle towards representations grounded in everyday experience (Ashworth, 1994; King et al., 2024; Larsen, 2019).

The analysis further indicates that this shift operates through compositional organisation rather than thematic content alone. Indirect gaze, eye-level perspectives, medium social distance, and open framing recur across the corpus, shaping how viewers engage with the depicted scenes. These configurations are consistent with social semiotic interpretations of non-addressive “offer”

images, which position the viewer as an observer with access to ongoing activity without requiring direct interaction (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2021; Rose, 2016).

Interpreting these patterns together suggests that everyday urban coolness can be understood as a visual–semiological outcome that emerges from the alignment between everyday content and participation-oriented compositional strategies. In this sense, coolness is not treated as an intrinsic attribute of the city or solely as a perceptual response, but as an effect associated with how ordinariness is organised to appear accessible, socially active, and experientially open. This perspective complements existing studies that approach destination coolness primarily at the level of perception by clarifying how such perceptions may be supported within visual representation (Kock, 2021).

The patterns identified in this study can also be read in relation to broader destination communication practices. The visual emphasis on everyday life, combined with non-intrusive compositional strategies, aligns with an approach in which destinations are presented as lived environments rather than as distant attractions. Within this context, official platforms such as GoTürkiye appear to favour a communicative logic that foregrounds accessibility, familiarity, and participation as desirable qualities, while maintaining a degree of observational distance that avoids direct visual address.

Variation across thematic domains adds nuance to this interpretation. Mobility and lived urban space are more consistently associated with open framing and spatial continuity, reinforcing movement and navigability, while consumption-related imagery more often balances proximity and observation. These differences suggest that ordinariness functions as a flexible representational resource that adapts across everyday practices while maintaining internal coherence (Condevaux et al., 2021; Larsen, 2019).

The complementary content analysis further indicates that visual normalisation is occasionally accompanied by textual direction or selective iconic referencing. Rather than replacing everyday representation, these elements appear to operate as secondary cues that guide interpretation or introduce moments of emphasis. This points to a layered communicative strategy in which visual and textual components interact without fully converging (Lobinger & Mele, 2022; Rose, 2016).

The findings also gain additional relevance when considered in the context of Istanbul's urban character. The city's dense everyday social life, its layered historical structure, and its position at the intersection of different cultural geographies contribute to the plausibility and resonance of everyday representation. The emphasis on ordinary practices may therefore reflect not only a general shift in destination imagery but also a context-specific alignment with how the city is commonly experienced and imagined.

Overall, the analysis suggests a reorientation in how urban desirability is communicated within official destination imagery. Rather than relying predominantly on iconic spectacle, the city is visually framed as an environment that can be experienced through ordinary practices. This framing supports an understanding of urban appeal in which accessibility, social activity, and everyday participation are central to how the destination becomes meaningful.

7. CONCLUSION

This study examined how everyday urban life is visually constructed within official destination imagery and how such representations relate to the communicative production of everyday urban coolness. The findings suggest that ordinariness functions as a structured visual

resource through which urban environments are presented as socially active, accessible, and already inhabited, rather than as neutral depictions of reality.

The analysis indicates that this effect is shaped through the interaction between thematic representations and compositional organisation. Recurring use of indirect gaze, eye-level perspectives, medium social distance, and open framing structures how viewers relate to the depicted scenes, positioning them as observers of ongoing everyday activity rather than as directly addressed participants (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2021; Rose, 2016).

Within this configuration, everyday urban coolness can be understood as a visual-semiological effect emerging from the alignment between ordinary practices and participation-oriented compositional strategies. In this sense, the study does not propose a new theoretical model but clarifies how coolness may be visually organised within destination imagery, complementing existing approaches that have primarily examined it as a perceptual outcome (Kock, 2021).

The findings further indicate that everydayness operates as a flexible representational strategy across different domains of urban life. While mobility and spatial scenes emphasise continuity and navigability, consumption-related imagery more often balances proximity and observation. This variation supports an understanding of ordinariness as a dynamic semiotic resource rather than a fixed category (Condevaux et al., 2021; Larsen, 2019).

These findings point to a shift in how urban desirability is articulated within official destination imagery. The city is less frequently framed through iconic spectacle and more often through scenes of routine practice, social interaction, and lived environments. This perspective highlights the role of visual organisation in shaping how destinations are imagined as accessible and experientially meaningful.

8. THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

This study contributes to research on destination imagery and urban tourism by offering a refined account of how everyday urban coolness can be examined within visual representation. Rather than introducing a new conceptual framework, the analysis provides a more detailed account of how coolness may be visually structured within official destination imagery, complementing existing work that has largely approached the concept at the level of perception and evaluation (Aiello, 2006; Kock, 2021).

The findings also contribute to research on destination imagery by showing that the increasing emphasis on everyday representation extends beyond thematic shifts alone. Ordinary urban practices gain meaning in relation to how images position viewers. Compositional elements such as gaze, social distance, camera angle, and framing play a role in shaping how accessibility and participation are suggested within visual representation. This perspective refines existing discussions by linking experiential accessibility to specific visual configurations (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2021; Rose, 2016).

In relation to discussions of authenticity in urban tourism, the study suggests that everydayness can be understood as a representational strategy rather than as an inherent attribute of place. Ordinary practices are selectively framed and organised in ways that stabilise meanings of familiarity and social normalcy. This perspective shifts attention from authenticity as something detected by viewers to authenticity as something visually articulated within representation (Condevaux et al., 2021; Larsen, 2019).

The study also highlights the value of integrating visual grammar into tourism research. By considering compositional organisation alongside thematic representation, the analysis illustrates

how viewer positioning and meaning-making are shaped within images. This provides an analytical basis for examining how visual elements contribute to the construction of destination meaning without treating them as secondary to content (Lobinger & Mele, 2022; Metro-Roland, 2011).

9. PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

The findings indicate that destination communication strategies can be strengthened by giving greater visibility to everyday urban practices within visual representation. Scenes of informal social interaction, routine mobility, and ordinary consumption offer a way of communicating accessibility and social vibrancy, supporting a mode of destination promotion that resonates with contemporary interest in lived experience and everyday engagement (Koenig, 2021; Larsen, 2019).

The analysis also highlights the role of compositional choices in shaping how viewers relate to destination imagery. The consistent use of indirect gaze suggests that perceived authenticity may be reinforced when depicted subjects are not directly addressing the viewer. This non-addressive structure enables audiences to observe and interpret everyday life without feeling explicitly targeted, fostering a more open and less directive form of engagement (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2021; Lobinger & Mele, 2022).

Compositional variation appears to be used deliberately across different representational contexts, suggesting a similar pattern. Scenes emphasising mobility and spatial experience tend to benefit from open framing, which reinforces continuity and navigability, while consumption-oriented imagery often balances proximity and observational distance to maintain a sense of intimacy without producing visual intrusion. Such differentiation helps sustain visual coherence while reducing the risk of repetition or saturation (Condevaux et al., 2021).

The relatively limited prominence of iconic landmarks in the analysed images indicates that everyday settings can effectively communicate destination meaning. Iconicity remains present, but is often integrated into lived urban contexts rather than isolated as spectacle. This suggests that destination branding can retain recognisable elements while also emphasising ordinary spatial practices and social interaction (Larsen, 2019; Metro-Roland, 2011).

The findings also draw attention to the relationship between visual and textual elements in destination communication. While visual imagery tends to establish accessibility and familiarity through non-intrusive compositional strategies, textual prompts and selective references to iconicity can introduce direction or emphasis where needed. This combination allows destination management organisations to guide interpretation without undermining the sense of openness created within the visual material.

10. LIMITATIONS & FUTURE RESEARCH

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings. The analysis is based on a purposively selected subset of images drawn from a single official destination platform. This design supports close visual-semiological examination while remaining aligned with the study's analytical focus. At the same time, the patterns identified here should not be taken as representative of all forms of destination imagery or urban contexts (Lobinger & Mele, 2022; Rose, 2016).

The focus on still images also shapes the scope of the study. Contemporary destination communication increasingly relies on multiple media formats, including video, short-form content, and social media platforms. These formats involve different compositional conventions and modes

of viewer engagement. The patterns discussed here reflect the logic of still-image communication and may not extend directly to other visual environments (Lobinger & Mele, 2022).

The study adopts an interpretive visual–semiological approach. Although supported by a structured codebook and systematic coding procedure, the identification of meaning remains shaped by the analytical perspective brought to the material. This is consistent with qualitative visual research, where meaning is treated as contextually produced and analytically constructed (Aiello, 2006; Rose, 2016).

The empirical focus on institutionally curated imagery also defines the scope of the findings. Official destination platforms reflect selective visual narratives aligned with branding and communication objectives. Visual material produced by tourists or local actors may frame everyday urban life differently, potentially foregrounding alternative practices, meanings, and spatial experiences (Larsen, 2019; Metro-Roland, 2011).

Future research could extend this work by examining comparable image sets across multiple urban destinations. Comparative analyses may help to establish whether similar visual patterns of everyday urban coolness appear across different cultural and spatial contexts. Expanding the dataset to include larger image corpora would also support further examination of how stable or variable these patterns are.

Further research could also explore differences between official and user-generated imagery, offering insight into how everyday urban life is framed across distinct visual environments. Such comparisons may reveal divergences between institutional representations and lived visual practices.

Audience-oriented approaches provide another direction for extension. Reception studies or experimental designs could investigate how viewers interpret visual–semiological configurations, linking representational structures with perceptual outcomes such as coolness and authenticity (Kock, 2021).

Future research may also develop the analytical approach adopted here within a broader multimodal perspective, examining how image, text, and other media elements interact in shaping destination meaning across contemporary tourism platforms.

Declaration on the Use of Artificial Intelligence

In the preparation of this study, the author utilised DeepL Write for the purpose of identifying and correcting grammatical errors, as well as enhancing the clarity and fluency of the text. Following the use of this tool, the author carefully reviewed and, where necessary, revised the content independently, and assumed full responsibility for the integrity and content of the published article.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A. Semiological Codebook and Analytical Categories

Table A1. Semiological Themes of Everyday Urban Life Represented in Official Destination Imagery

Category	Definition	Semiological Function	RQ
Informal Social Interaction	Non-staged, routine social encounters (e.g., talking, sitting together)	Naturalization of social life	RQ1
Everyday Mobility	Walking or slow movement within urban space	Construction of the city as lived environment	RQ1
Ordinary Consumption	Everyday food and beverage practices	Lifestyle normalization	RQ1
Lived Urban Space	Streets, cafés, and squares used for mixed everyday purposes	Representation of continuous urban life	RQ1, RQ3

Table A2. Visual Grammar Categories and Semiotic Functions in the Analysis

Category	Definition	Values	Semiological Role	RQ
Gaze	Direction of subjects' gaze	Direct / Indirect	Engagement vs. observation	RQ2
Social Distance	Visual proximity between viewer and depicted subjects	Close / Medium / Long	Intimacy vs. detachment	RQ2
Camera Angle	Vertical positioning of the viewer	Eye-level / High / Low	Equality vs. hierarchy	RQ2
Framing	Degree of spatial openness	Open / Closed	Spatial embeddedness vs. isolation	RQ2

Table A3. Everyday Urban Coolness as an Integrative Semiological Construct

Construct	Definition	Semiological Indicators	RQ
Everyday Urban Coolness	Interpretive categorisation of images where everyday urban practices are visually organised to suggest accessibility, social activity, and experiential openness	Co-occurrence of everyday practices with compositional cues indicating symbolic proximity, non-intrusive engagement, and participatory framing	RQ3, RQ4

Appendix B. Quantitative Summaries Supporting the Findings (n = 40)

Table B1. Frequency Distribution of Semiological Themes of Everyday Urban Life

Semiological theme	n	%
Informal Social Interaction	10	25.0
Everyday Mobility	10	25.0
Ordinary Consumption	10	25.0
Lived Urban Space	10	25.0
Total	40	100.0

Notes: Frequency and percentage distribution of the four semiological themes of everyday urban life across the coded Bucket List corpus (n = 40). Themes correspond to Appendix A (Table A1).

Table B2. Summary Distribution of Visual Grammar Categories and Coolness Level (n = 40)

Dimension	Distribution (n, %)
Gaze	Direct: 0 (0.0%); Indirect: 40 (100.0%)
Social distance	Close: 6 (15.0%); Medium: 22 (55.0%); Long: 12 (30.0%)
Camera angle	Eye-level: 35 (87.5%); High: 4 (10.0%); Low: 1 (2.5%)
Framing	Open: 33 (82.5%); Closed: 7 (17.5%)
Coolness level	Low: 0 (0.0%); Medium: 10 (25.0%); High: 30 (75.0%)

Notes: Frequency and percentage distributions of visual grammar categories and coolness levels across the coded corpus (n = 40). Values reflect patterns within the purposively selected sample and do not represent population-level distributions.

Table B3. Co-occurrence Matrix: Theme × Viewer-Positioning Cues (within-theme %)

Theme	n	Indirect gaze	Medium distance	Eye-level angle	Open framing
Informal Social Interaction	10	10 (100.0%)	6 (60.0%)	8 (80.0%)	7 (70.0%)
Everyday Mobility	10	10 (100.0%)	5 (50.0%)	10 (100.0%)	10 (100.0%)
Ordinary Consumption	10	10 (100.0%)	7 (70.0%)	8 (80.0%)	6 (60.0%)
Lived Urban Space	10	10 (100.0%)	4 (40.0%)	9 (90.0%)	10 (100.0%)

Notes: Within-theme co-occurrence between semiological themes and selected viewer-positioning cues. Percentages are calculated within each thematic category (n = 10 per category) and reflect distribution within the analytical sample.

Appendix C. Content Analysis

Appendix C1. Content Analysis Codebook

(CTA and Iconicity Analysis – GoTürkiye Istanbul Bucket List Imagery)

Unit of Analysis

A single visual card, consisting of an image and its associated title text, as presented on the official GoTürkiye “Istanbul Bucket List” platform.

A. Call-to-Action (CTA) Codes

A1. Primary CTA Verb

Code	Definition
TRY	Encourages experiential trial
DISCOVER	Emphasises exploration
GO	Invites movement or visitation
TAKE	Encourages participation in an activity
ATTEND	Event-oriented participation
TASTE	Gastronomic engagement
EXPLORE	Broad experiential engagement
NO_CTA	Descriptive naming without an action verb

A2. CTA Mode

Code	Definition
IMPERATIVE	Direct command
INVITATIONAL	Implicit or soft invitation
DESCRIPTIVE	Non-directive, nominal phrasing

A3. Locality Claim

Code	Definition
LOCAL	Explicit reference to local everyday life
TOURISTIC	Generalised or heritage-oriented framing
NEUTRAL	No explicit locality claim

B. Iconicity Codes

B1. Iconic Landmark Presence

Code	Definition
ICONIC	Globally recognisable landmark
SEMI_ICONIC	Locally recognisable place or venue
NON_ICONIC	Everyday urban setting

B2. Mode of Iconic Representation

(coded only if ICONIC or SEMI_ICONIC)

Code	Definition
SPECTACLE	Distant, postcard-like representation
LIVED_ICON	Embedded in everyday use
HYBRID	Combination of spectacle and lived cues

C. Text-Image Alignment

C1. Persuasion Alignment

Code	Definition
ALIGNED	Text and image reinforce the same logic
TENSION	Directive text paired with calm/everyday imagery
INVERSE	Iconic imagery paired with everyday/local text

Appendix C2. Content Analysis Results

Table C1. Distribution of CTA Verbs and Modes (n = 40)

Category	n	%
NO_CTA (descriptive)	21	52.5
Imperative CTA verbs	19	47.5
Total	40	100.0

Note: Imperative CTAs are concentrated in mobility- and event-related images, while descriptive naming dominates everyday practices.

Table C2. Iconicity of Visual Representations

Iconicity	n	%
Non-iconic everyday spaces	20	50.0
Semi-iconic places	13	32.5
Iconic landmarks	7	17.5
Total	40	100.0

Note: The corpus favours everyday and semi-iconic spatial settings over globally iconic landmarks.

Table C3. Iconic Representation and Text-Image Alignment

C3a. Mode of Iconic Representation (n = 20)

Mode	n	%
Lived icon	12	60.0
Spectacle	4	20.0
Hybrid	4	20.0

C3b. Text-Image Alignment (n = 40)

Alignment	n	%
Aligned	29	72.5
Tension	7	17.5
Inverse	4	10.0